

Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville

Lent 5

25 March 2007

Preacher
The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector

Readings: Isaiah 43.16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3.3-14; John 12.1-8

Judas

Have you ever noticed that many if not all people seem to have a much more negative view of themselves than others do? That most of us seem to be our own harshest critics. Those things that we accept and excuse in others we don't so easily tolerate in ourselves. It's almost that we expect that we ought to be perfect, able to do all things well, despite the pressures and competing demands most of us face as we journey through life. I suspect in fact it goes quite deep, tied in with the fact that we find it difficult to forgive ourselves when we muck up, get things wrong. Knowing ourselves to be flawed, inadequate we find it hard to believe that we are really acceptable, loved. This deep seated existential insecurity is revealed in the fear of death that many, many people have. Even people of faith, perhaps especially people of faith have the fear that ultimately we will be judged as unworthy by God. Carl Jung has something to say about this in "Modern Man in Search of a Soul" when he says:

"We cannot change anything unless we accept it. Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses. I am the oppressor of the person I condemn, not his friend and fellow-sufferer. I do not in the least mean to say that we must never pass judgement ... (but if we) wish to help a human being we must be able to accept him as he is. And one can do this in reality only when one has already seen and accepted oneself as one is.

"Perhaps this sounds very simple, but simple things are always the most difficult. In actual life it requires the greatest discipline to be simple, and the acceptance of oneself is the essence of the moral problem and the epitome of a whole outlook upon life. That I feed the hungry, that I forgive all insult, that I love my enemy in the name of Christ—all these are undoubtedly great virtues. What I do unto the least of my brethren that I do unto Christ. But what if I should discover that the least amongst them all, the poorest of all the beggars, the most impudent of all the offenders, the very enemy himself that these are within me, and that I myself stand in need of the alms of my own kindness that I myself am the enemy who must be loved what then? As a rule, the Christian's attitude is then reversed; there is no longer any question of love or longsuffering; we say to the brother within us 'Racca', and condemn and rage against ourselves. We hide it from the world; we refuse to admit ever having met this least among the lowly in ourselves. Had it been God himself who drew near to us in this despicable form, we should have denied him a thousand times before a single cock had crowed.

"The man who uses modern psychology to look behind the scenes of his own life will admit that to accept himself in all his wretchedness is the hardest of tasks, and one which it is almost impossible to fulfil. The very thought can make us livid with fear. We therefore do not hesitate, but light-heartedly choose the complicated course of remaining in ignorance about ourselves while busying ourselves with other people and their troubles and sins. This activity lends us an air of virtue, and we thus deceive ourselves and those around us." p 271, 2

All this it seems to me begs the question, "have we fully understood and appreciated and received into ourselves Easter life and faith? So that it has truly become part of our reality, our identity. We say "death has no more dominion over us!" "That the power or effect of sin has been put to death"

to use traditional language. Yet we act as though our flaws/ imperfections, our sin block everything else out. Do we really believe that today and every day we are offered new life, Resurrection life made possible by the sheer love of God?

I'd like to tease this out by focusing on Judas, who features in today's Gospel passage. Judas traditionally has received a bad press, John subtly maligns him – now Judas was a thief – You may have noticed that there have been recent attempts to rehabilitate Judas a little with the publication of the Gospel of Judas. A bit of rehabilitation might actually be good news for all of us contain a Judas within us as Carl Jung so evocatively described in the passage I have just quoted. The crucial question is, “Can Judas be forgiven?” – “Can I be forgiven?”

There is an old legend that after he hanged himself and died, Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus, found himself at the bottom of a deep and slimy pit. For thousands of years he wept in self-pitying grief over what he had done. When the tears were finally spent, he looked up and saw way, way, way up a tiny, tiny glimmer of light. After he contemplated the light for another thousand years or so, he began to try to climb up toward it. The walls of the pit were dank and slimy and he kept slipping back down. Finally, after great effort he neared the top, and then . . . he slipped and fell . . . all the way back down. It took him many years to recover, all the time weeping bitter tears of anguish. After many more efforts and falls, he finally lay at the bottom of the pit and cried out, "I can't! I can't do this!" And then suddenly, Judas found himself in an upper room with twelve people sitting around an amply spread banquet table. "We've been waiting for you Judas," said the one at the head of the table, whom Judas immediately recognized as Jesus. "We've been waiting for you Judas. We couldn't begin without you.

Let the light that Judas saw be the promise of Easter, the promise of resurrection. Let the deep and slimy pit be all of our faults and failings. Now Judas did the natural thing: he tried to climb out of the pit – he tried to reach for the light himself. Good for him, to want to pull himself up by the bootstraps. But of course, Judas's attempts to climb out of the pit on his own failed miserably – and his despair became greater and greater until one day he said, "I can't . . . I can't." We call that in the Church, repentance. To say, "I can't," is the radical surrender of all our attempts to save ourselves. Repentance is to give up our natural inclinations to overcome the world by our own striving – and to turn to God and say, "I can't come to new life no matter how hard I try. No matter how hard I try to raise myself from the ways of death, I fall down into the slime again. Only you God can restore a right spirit within me. Only you God can make me whole. Only you God can raise me up from the dead. I can't. Cf the younger so in last week's Gospel – finally gave up the attempt that he could somehow redeem himself by working as a hired servant and accepted the gift of sonship.

There is something terribly offensive about the Legend of Judas, something that goes against what is "natural." How could the one who betrayed Christ ever be forgiven? And yet if not that Judas, what about the Judas in you and in me? Fortunately the God of Easter is no respecter of persons. God's promise of resurrection, of new life, is for all – for all. I know – the "for all" part doesn't seem fair – especially for those of us who've been hanging around the church all our lives trying to do the right thing. But God isn't fair! The promise of Easter is not just for a select few – hard to believe as that may be. Rather, God's love is completely promiscuous; wasteful is my word for it (Spong). God's love is even – or maybe especially – for the worst of the worst. The promise of Easter is for those of us who betray, who deny, who run away when things get scary. Yes, most unnaturally (!!), God's love is for the very worst of us – and even for the best of us and for those of us somewhere in between. God has promised – and the promises of God are irrevocable. And so, sons and daughters of God I say to you: “In Holy Baptism you were marked with the cross of Christ, the sign of God's promise to raise you up to new life – each and every day. And nothing and no-one – not even you – can do anything to screw that one up.

Praise God. Amen.